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SUBJECT: A LOOK AHEAD TO THE OCTOBER 12 REGIONAL ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 12, five regions (Chechnya, Zabaykalskiy Kray, Irkutsk, and Kemerovo and Sakhalin Oblasts) will elect their respective regional parliaments. Also, throughout Russia over 90 municipal and by-elections will take place, including by-elections in Chukotka. United Russia has taken the elections most seriously, and is expected to emerge victorious in each region, with Irkutsk promising mild competition with Just Russia. Ballots in the regions will feature between four and seven party choices, with all four of the parties represented in the State Duma included, but none of the traditional "liberal" parties. The Union of Right Forces is considering challenging in court their failure to be registered, but observers downplay prospects for success, questioning both the merits of the case and the political atmosphere. Many observers expect that regional United Russia party/government leaders will be judged by the results they deliver, determining their own political futures in advance of the party's November national congress. Septels will follow reporting on specific issues and personalities in each region, as well as analysis of the activities of major parties. End Summary.

GENERAL BACKGROUND: ELECTORAL THRESHOLDS

¶2. (SBU) Regional elections are held in accordance with federal and regional electoral legislation and thus vary from region to region. Regional parliaments can be elected either by proportional representation or by a mixed electoral system, in which some single-mandate candidates can still win seats in parliament despite their party's failure to register a candidate list. Chechnya is the only region to use only proportional representation, so only parties will run and deputies will be selected from their respective party lists according to the results. The other four regions will use a mixed electoral system: half of the deputies will be elected from party lists and half from single-mandate candidates, who may be party members or independent candidates. The passing threshold to win party seats in all five regions is 7 percent. Law demands that at least two parties should be represented in each parliament. Even if any one party wins more than 60 percent and all other parties each win less than the required 7 percent, the party with the second most votes will still get seats in the parliament.

¶3. (SBU) The parliamentary parties -- those represented in the State Duma -- are exempt from collecting signatures of supporters and from paying an electoral pledge fee. They have all successfully registered in all 5 regions, where ballots contain from 4 to 7 party choices. All other registered parties wishing to participate in elections must either collect the signatures or pay the pledge fee. Each region determines the number of signatures, the amount of the pledge, and the threshold for winning seats. Pledge requirements for parties range from 1 million rubles (about 40,000 USD) in Sakhalin to 6 million rubles (about 240,000 USD) in Irkutsk. These high fees resulted in non-Duma parties opting instead for the signature requirements. None of the other traditional opposition "liberal" parties are

registered to compete in the forthcoming elections.

DISAPPOINTED OPPOSITION, FROM DENIAL TO ACCEPTANCE

¶4. (SBU) A September 10 media report stated that the Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Patriots of Russia parties may attempt to restore their party lists through the courts. The report added that SPS officials believed the party could do well enough in the Kemerovo election to win seats in the regional parliament, but its own lawyers acknowledged that overturning registration denials through the courts would be exceptional.

Media reported September 12 that SPS is considering an urgent appeal to the European Court of Human Rights to attempt to compel authorities to include the party on regional ballots. Yabloko leader Sergey Mitrokhin told the press that his party will not seek to overturn their denial in Sakhalin Oblast because "experience shows that an appeal to the courts is meaningless...We have no courts, just as there is no election." Mitrokhin pointed to Yabloko's failure to overturn his party's registration denial in previous St. Petersburg regional elections.

¶5. (SBU) Patriots of Russia Party vice-chairman Nadezhda Korneeva complained in a media report that her party had been unfairly excluded from ballots in Sakhalin and Irkutsk, adding that "all of our (signature) collectors are willing to come to court and prove" that the signatures are valid. According to her, current election laws are prejudiced in favor of Duma parties because they do not need to collect signatures or make an electoral pledge.

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"LOCOMOTIVES"

¶6. (SBU) It has become traditional in Russian elections for party lists to be topped by party leaders during federal elections and by heads of regions and federal or regional party leaders during regional campaigns. These top-level functionaries, dubbed "locomotives," as a rule refuse to join the parliaments. They are involved in the campaigns in hope that their authority and popularity will help their respective parties to win. In regional campaigns, United Russia usually tops its party lists with governors and mayors of the regional capitals. The Communist Party (KPRF), LDPR, and Just Russia appoint their most popular federal and regional leaders to top their lists, although Just Russia until recently had been critical of the "locomotive" practice.

¶7. (SBU) United Russia will head regional party lists with the following locomotives: Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya; Governor Ravil Geniatullin and Chita Mayor Anatoliy Mikhalev in Zabaykalskiy Kray; Governor Aman Tuleyev in Kemerovo; Governor Aleksandr Khoroshavin in Sakhalin; and Acting Governor Igor Yesipovskiy in Irkutsk (The election results will determine whether Yesipovskiy will continue to be "acting.") Moscow Carnegie Center regional expert Nikolay Petrov told us that he expects United Russia to emerge victorious in each region, but that in Irkutsk intra-party competition between rival clans under the United Russia roof could leave the party apparatus there in worse shape as a result of the elections. Duma Deputy Oksana Dmitrieva (Just Russia) confirmed to us that her party regards Irkutsk as the only region in which it stands to do well on October 12 - both due to the party's appeal and to United Russia vulnerabilities there.

REGIONAL BREAKDOWNS

Chechnya

¶8. (SBU) The republic will elect only its second parliament.

An amendment to the Chechen constitution, passed by referendum in December 2007, transformed the bicameral parliament (elected in November 2005) to unicameral in order to strengthen vertical power and bring it in line with other regional parliaments. The number of parliamentarians has been lowered from 61 to 41. Chechnya will elect its parliament through a proportional representation system, so only parties may run in the election. Nine parties submitted candidate lists, and authorities approved seven to appear on the ballot in the following order: United Russia, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Patriots of Russia, Peace and Unity, People's Union, Communist Party (KPRF) and Just Russia (SR).

¶ 9. (SBU) Authorities denied registration to Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Zelenye (an ecological party) because more than 20 percent of submitted signatures were deemed deficient. According to a recent opinion poll by the Center of Strategic Studies and Development of Civil Society in North Caucasus (SK-Strategia), 84.3 percent of the Chechen Republic's population intend to vote.

¶ 10. (SBU) In an August 27 media report, political expert Aleksandr Kynev predicted that only the Communists would have a chance of joining United Russia in the Chechen parliament. The other parties, he observed, are running exclusively for the sake of retaining their registered status.

Irkutsk

¶ 11. (SBU) Irkutsk is a new, enlarged region since Ust-Orda Burta Autonomous Oblast joined it in January 2008. It will elect its first parliament of 50 deputies. Seven parties submitted candidate lists, and authorities approved six to appear on the ballot, in the following order: Ecological Party "Zelenye," United Russia, KPRF, LDPR, Agrarian Party, and SR.

¶ 12. (SBU) Authorities denied registration to Patriots of Russia because more than 20 percent of the submitted signatures were deemed deficient.

Kemerovo

¶ 13. (SBU) Thirty elections of different levels will take place throughout the region on October 12. Voters will elect 12 mayors and 17 representative bodies of self-government.

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The regional parliament is 36 deputies strong, 18 elected each from party lists and single-mandate candidates. There are 150 claimants to the 36 seats, 80 from the parties and 70 from single-mandate candidates. Six parties submitted candidate lists, and authorities approved four to appear on the ballot, in the following order: United Russia, KPRF, SR, and LDPR.

¶ 14. (SBU) Authorities denied registration to Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Party of Peace and Unity because more than 10 percent of the submitted signatures were deemed deficient.

Sakhalin

¶ 15. (SBU) The region will elect deputies to 28 seats in the regional parliament. Seven parties submitted candidate lists, and authorities approved four (the State Duma parties) to appear on the ballot: SR, LDPR, KPRF and United Russia.

¶ 16. (SBU) Authorities denied registration to Yabloko and Patriots of Russia because of reported deficiencies in their submitted signatures, and People's Union failed to collect the required number of signatures.

Zabaykalskiy Kray

¶17. (SBU) Zabaykalskiy Kray is a new region in the Russian Federation created on March 1, 2008, with the merger of Chita Oblast and Aginsk Buryat Autonomous Okrug. In its first parliament since the merger, it will elect 50 deputies, half from party lists and half from single-mandate candidates.

¶18. (SBU) Seven parties notified the election commission of their intention to participate in elections to the Kray's parliament. Authorities denied Ecological Party "Zelenye" for failing to collect enough signatures; six other parties submitted all required documents on time. The four parliamentary parties (United Russia, KPRF, LDPR, and SR) have been approved, but final information is not yet available on registration for the Agrarian Party or the Democratic Party. A September 10 media report quoted Democratic Party leader Andrey Bogdanov as saying that his party knew that their staff "did not collect signatures entirely correctly."

BY-ELECTIONS IN CHUKOTKA

¶19. (SBU) The parliament of Chukotka has three vacant seats to fill during its by-elections on October 12. The former governor, Roman Abramovich, has been registered as one of the candidates. His former deputies, Andrey Gorodilov and Aramais Dallakyan, are running from two other single-mandate districts. There are only 12 deputies in the Chukotka government, of which 6 each are elected from party lists and single-mandate districts. Thus, it is very likely that one-fourth of the parliament will be staffed by Abramovich and his people.

¶20. (SBU) Comment: In the view of many experts, the elections are more about the ability of regional United Russia leaders to deliver for the party and thereby make their case to the national leadership for remaining in their party and government positions. The election results, together with United Russia plans to re-assess how regional party and government officials are selected, will be a major topic for discussion at United Russia's November national congress.

BEYRLE